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ABSTRACT

To gather information for use in developing the curriculum of a new Corporate College executive training program, Hagerstown Junior College (HJC) conducted a study of management and leadership practices at five organizations in the western Maryland region. The study used focus group interviews with hourly employees to gather information from participants on recent experiences that they felt had influenced their motivation, trust, and involvement levels within their organizations. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours, and the 5 sessions involved 22 employees. In all, 162 separate comments were recorded in 6 categories, namely: establishing credibility; fostering participation; distributing authority; providing support; recognizing contributions; and creating a mission. Of the 162 comments, 70% related to systems design or work flow issues, while 30% were directed toward individual behavior. Findings of the study included the following: (1) employees were intense observers of management actions and were adept at noticing discrepancies between words and deeds; (2) employees recognized the importance of cooperation in the work setting, and wanted input into decisions that affected their work; (3) employees felt positive when given opportunities to plan and implement their own work and felt equally unmotivated when playing passive roles or when management intervened inappropriately; (4) employees expected managers to make their jobs easier; (5) employees wanted monetary and social/personal recognition for their work; and (6) employees favored a strong sense of organizational direction. As a result of the study, HJC determined that Corporate College programming must include a course/seminar which directly addresses the design of work and that programming efforts should target existing or emerging leaders, rather than mid- or lower-level management. (JMC)

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Employee Productivity: What Followers Need From Managers

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A Report From the HJC Corporate College

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A Report From the HJC Corporate College

Corporate College

Executive Summary Report

Employee Productivity: What Followers Need From Managers

The Continuing Education division of HJC has completed a management and leadership practices study involving five organizations in the Western Maryland Region. The study used focus group interviews with hourly employees to gather information for use in developing curriculum content for a new Corporate College executive training program.

The method was a focus group design in which participants described recent experiences which they felt influenced their motivation, trust, and involvement levels within their organizations. A response form was used to guide discussions, although participants were free to describe whatever experiences they felt were most revealing of positive or negative management and leadership behavior.

Each interview lasted approximately two hours and the five sessions involved 22 employees. In all, 162 separate comments were recorded in six categories. The following lists each of the categories in order of importance with frequency of comments used as the determining factor for the rankings.

1) Establishing Credibility - consistency of management behavior, accountability for actions, fair treatment, even application of policy, honesty, openness and integrity. Behaving competently with security of self-concept and demonstrating knowledge of the business.

(50 responses)

2) Fostering Participation - management action involving employees in collaborative decision making which influences business outcomes.

(36 responses)

3) Distributing Authority - delegation of authority and responsibility to accomplish work. Giving employees opportunity to show their worth.

(26 responses)

4) Providing Support - management's ability to expedite, grease the skids, facilitate across lines of authority and resolve problems that influence the employee's work.

(22 responses)

5) Recognizing Contributions - giving encouragement through the use of incentives tied directly to individual or team accomplishment. Showing appreciation and caring through simple actions.

(21 responses)

6) Creating mission - charting the course, developing a shared sense of direction and purpose.

(7 responses)

Interestingly, 70% of the 162 comments related to systems design or work flow issues while only 30% were directed toward individual behavior. The data suggests that the greatest potential for increasing productivity rests with the design of work, structure, and management architecture rather than specific training targeted at individuals or employee groups.

This finding is consistent with current work in the field as found in the writing of authors such as Ouchi (Theory Z), Tom Peter's, and Rosabeth Moss Kanter. A recently published work by Leonard Sayles from the Center for Creative Leadership addresses the topic of "work flow" as a critical element for redefining what is essential to business performance. In addition, supporting conclusions were drawn by Kouses and Posner in their studies of leadership practices. The close relationship between findings of Kouses and Posner and results of our focus group sessions is of particular significance and bears further discussion.

Best Case Scenarios

Using a leadership practices inventory and interview process, Kouses and Posner surveyed several thousand managers and executives to determine "best case" leadership behaviors. Executives were asked to describe experiences which reflected their personal best performances as leaders. Through statistical technique, the authors arrived at five behaviors which leaders engaged in during what they felt were their best performances. These were:

1) Enabling others to act - fostering collaboration and strengthening others.

2) Challenging the process - searching for opportunities, experimenting and taking risks.

3) Encouraging the heart - recognizing individual

contribution and celebrating accomplishments.

4) Modeling the way - setting the example and planning small wins.

5) Inspiring a shared vision - envisioning the future and enlisting others.

The Follower View

In a related study by the same authors, 1500 managers were queried about the values or characteristics they admire in their superiors. The most frequent responses, in order of mention, were integrity and honesty, competence, forward-looking, and inspiring. The conclusion reached by the authors was that, taken together, these traits encapsulate one dimension .... "credibility". Thus, the believability of the leader is prerequisite to gaining followership.

While some differences are noted in the perspectives of leaders and followers in terms of the behaviors they describe as important, considerable relationship exists among views, and findings from our local study did reflect the same general themes noted in the national research. For example, the collaboration, encouragement, modeling the way, and shared vision elements identified in the best case report all were evident in our own local study. Also, our finding that 70% of the comments in the local study related to systems issues is consistent with item two of Kouses and Posner's "best case" study, challenging the process. The credibility aspect, found to be first in importance in our research, did not appear directly in the best case study (though implied in the "modeling the way" item) but was very apparent in the responses of followers.

It is important to note, however, that both our local study and the followers study by Kouses and Posner differed from the "best case" report specifically with respect to the importance placed on the credibility factor. Followers seem to place a greater emphasis on this aspect than the leaders do themselves. This finding suggests that what followers see and look for as evidence of good leadership is a bit different from what leaders regard as important in their own actions and behavior. To that end, there appears to be some distinction between assumed leadership by managers and earned leadership assigned by followers.

Comments within Categories

Comments from participants in our focus groups were rich with example of effective and ineffective leadership and management practice. As mentioned earlier, however, much of the behavior

associated with good or bad management appears to be more a function of the design of the work environment rather than the personal skill levels of individual managers themselves. The following section includes the particularly revealing comments which best reflected the essence of the focus group conversations.

Establishing Credibility

Several issues were discussed under this heading as it was by far the one of greatest concern. Overall, the most striking finding in this category was the intensity with which employees observe management actions and how adept people are at picking up discrepancies between words and deeds. The result is that managers who speak or behave inconsistently quickly lose trust and are rendered ineffective. For example, one of the situations which comes to mind was presented by a loading dock operator. The worker cited an occurrance where he was asked to hurry to load a truck for shipment, and then after working hard to get the job done quickly, he observed the truck sitting in the dock for hours waiting for shipment. This kind of discrepant behavior, though it may seem insignificant at the time, has the cumulative effect of causing employees to lose faith in management integrity.

One employee spoke of the credibility issue in this way: "trust is a two way street. I look at it like an account. I will trust someone until something happens, then I will deduct from their account."

In several cases, employees felt that the supervisor's inconsistency was a result of undermining action by upper management and that supervisors would waffle because of lack of authority to follow through.

Another main concern discussed within the groups had to do with accountability for work and a feeling of inequity of distribution of work. Workers were bothered by management's willingness to allow some to freeload. Some were unsure as to whether management actually knew that some weren't carrying their weight because feedback systems did not have enough accountability within them.

Considerable discussion took place relative to the willingness of supervisors to share information. Much of this seemed to be tied into the communication process and whether fluid channels existed within the organization and whether open communications were designed into the work environment.

Fostering Participation

Employees recognize the importance of cooperation in the work

setting. They also want to have input into decisions which affect their work. Employees expressed a need for more bonding and togetherness of workers. Jealousies and competitive pressure within work groups, across department lines, and across shifts were noted as factors which detracted from worker cohesiveness.

In several cases, management strategy was cited as contributing to the competition. In one case, if was noted how a practice of having workers, who operate the same machine on different shifts, compete for daily output goals seemed to cause friction between the competing members. Although the competitive set-up would produce short-term daily gains, the approach also had potential for encouraging employees to ignore maintenance issues on their machines and leave the next shift's operator saddled with considerable down time.

The participative dimension was particularly interesting due to the involvement of one group in self-managed team activity in their company. Feedback regarding this type of approach was generally very positive with employees reporting considerable satisfaction from the localized decision making authority inherent in the process. However, several members expressed a level of discomfort with the ambiguity they were experiencing in that management structure and the loss of having someone to "ask" for approval. Much of these concerns appeared to be associated with the transition from a traditional heirarchical model to a flatter, participative one.

Distributing of Authority

"Give me a job and let me do it." This is the overall message from the employee focus groups. Employees felt positive when given opportunities to plan and implement their own work and equally unmotivated when playing passive roles or when management intervenes inappropriately. They felt motivated when allowed freedom to act and establish their own work pattern, by new challenges, and when the supervisor allowed them to assume new responsibilities. They felt unmotivated when they were not allowed to follow through on responsibilities they had assumed.

Employees expressed frustration with the "looking over my shoulder" feeling. That they were not totally trusted in their jobs. An example of this was an incident where the employee was given a set of keys and the responsibility to lock up the building. Although the employee felt proud of the trust that was shown in her, this feeling was always moderated by a statement each night from the supervisor reminding the employee to "don't forget to lock up."

Providing Support

Employees expect managers to make their jobs easier and they look to the supervisor for support in making key decisions, for correcting problems with work flow, and want them to serve as bridges to other departments and functions in the organization. They want to feel that their supervisor will support them if they make a mistake and help them to correct the problem in the future. They look to the supervisor to set the tone for team building. Some felt very positive about their supervisors in these respects. Some, however, felt their supervisors were less than effective because they did not have the proper authority to act on the behalf of the employees.

There was also a desire for better relations within work teams, across departments, and across shifts. Employees felt that an important role of the supervisor was to function to build bridges and make connections among workers and departments. Unfortunately, some employees felt that the supervisors themselves were so intent on protecting their turfs that they were actually damaging cohesiveness rather than contributing to it.

Recognizing Contributions

Employees want to know that their work is appreciated. The examples which they brought to the focus sessions tell us that there are essentially two forms of recognition which had an impact: 1) monetary and 2) social/personal.

Regarding the monetary form, it was quite clear that money, in order to have utility as an incentive and means of recognition, must be closely linked with individual or group productivity. Several focus groups expressed some involvement in monetary based incentive plans, ranging from bonus plans to profit sharing. The general feeling was that profit sharing was a motivator because it has the effect of raising the ownership and investment level of employees in their work and in the company.

Bonus plans were also seen as helpful, with the caveat that bonuses must have clear ties to some form of pre-established outcome goals. Toward that end, it would appear that the notion of annual bonuses, ie. Christmas bonus, is likely to have minimal impact on motivation and productivity because it is tied to a calendar event rather than to the achievement of a pre-determined goal.

On the negative side of the bonus plan was some consternation about the inequity of the size of upper management bonuses relative to those earned by the workers.

The second form of recognition and appreciation is best described as social/personal. These are simple ways to say thank you that appear to have a very significant impact on the employees. One employee group spoke of management opening up the pop machines on a hot day. Another individual mentioned a personal thank you from the president of the company. The use of awards for performance, attendance, and attitude were also mentioned as positive ways of showing appreciation. The willingness of the company to go the extra mile to help an employee experiencing difficulty, either health, family or otherwise was noted in the discussion.

Creating Mission

Although not a dominant element in our discussions, a subtle theme of direction and purpose was evident in employee comments. Employees observe signals or road signs which give them evidence of organizational direction. Statements relating to mission or purpose were expressed by focus group members in terms of their perception of the organization's degree of customer or product focus. Employees discussed their sense of confidence or trepidation about whether the company was adequately tuned in to customer needs or whether they felt an organizational commitment to producing a quality product.

In addition, the notion of mission or purpose seems directly related to the credibility factor. Managers without a strong sense of purpose may waffle or display inconsistency of action or decision making which in turn affects credibility.

Summary

In reviewing results from the focus group activities, it is clear that tremendous understanding has been gained from the process and it is recommended highly as a way for developing insight into organizational issues. The information contained within the the six themes is of great utility to us for curriculum construction and will provide important guidance as we create our Corporate College seminar programming.

One finding, however, specifically emerges as particularly significant as we ponder the design for our training programs. The vast perponderance of "systems" related concerns suggests that employees and managers often are merely playing out roles or functions prescribed by the work design. This seems to be a shift in thinking about how to approach organizational problems. Often, the knee jerk reaction to difficulties within an entity is specific remedial training targeted at the pivotal employee or employee group, typically addressing the problem as one of "human relations, communications skills, or motivation." In reality, it appears that the bulk of problems tend to be more technical from

the perspective of work flow, structural design or managerial approach.

Leonard R. Sayles, in his 1990 work, Redefining What's Essential to Business Performance described the problem this way:

> ....what often appears to be a simple problem of human relations or motivation is often a technical problem.
>
> It is usually tempting to say that two employees whose work is interdependent have a personality clash when their work fails to coordinate easily and consistently. It is predictable that employees will engage in adversarial recriminations when their jobs are mutually contradictory. What superficially appears to be misunderstanding or miscommunication usually, in our experience, is quite the opposite.....Similarly, conflicts over work are often ascribed to motivational problems when their root is in the ambiguity and complexity of the job interface.

Another way to view the dilemma is to examine communication from a symptom or cause perpective. Jack Gibb, in a 1965 work described two ways in which organizations can treat problems. The first, the "persuasion" approach sees communication as a tool to be regulated in order to accomplish organizational goals. Similarly breakdowns within the organization are often attributed to inadequacies in individual skills in controlling the flow of information. In contrast, the "problem solving" approach, assumes that effective communication is an intrinsic component of effective work and that communication problems are symptomatic of aberrant organization.

Gibb summarizes the opposing views as follows.

Two Alternative Views of the Communication Process

Persuasion Approach Focus is on:	Problem Solving Approach Focus in on:
1. Remedial programs	1. Diagnosis and etiology
2. Staff Responsibility	2. Line responsibility
3. Morale and Hygiene	3. Work product and job requirement
4. Persuasion	4. Problem solving
5. Control of communication flow	5. Trust and openness
6. Verbal communications	6. Management action
7. One-way messages	7. Interaction and climate
8. Knowledge and logic	8. Attitude and feeling
9. Output and telling	9. Input and listening

The strength of the data favoring the "systems approach" to organizational effectiveness is of great significance to us and our programming direction. This, coupled with the results regarding management "credibility" suggests two specific avenues for programming.

First, it appears that our programming must include, as a critical component, a course/seminar which directly addresses the design of work issue.

Second, since the responsibility for establishing direction regarding the approach to problems within an organization is largely the function of top leadership, it is felt that our programming efforts should first target existing or emerging leaders as opposed to directing efforts toward mid to lower level managers.

Thus, our current thinking for programming would include:

1) A seminar on leadership dynamics which would concentrate on the six themes identified in the focus group study.

2) A leadership communications seminar which would incorporate discussion of communications as symptom or cause.

3) An exploration of organizational and work design to include traditional and newer forms.

4) A leadership practicum intended to provide support for practical applications within an organization.

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